

December 12, 2008

Corruption: As the Senate continues to debate the fate of the Auto rescue plan, much of the news when I was in Washington this week centered on the corruption allegations concerning Illinois Governor Blagojevich. Those allegations are pretty astounding, and disgusting. Combine them with the news of Senator Ted Stevens (R-AK), Congressman William Jefferson (D-LA), former Governor Eliot Spitzer (D-NY), former Congressman Duke Cunningham (R-CA), and former Congressman Bob Ney (R-OH); one can get pretty cynical. And that's just some of the recent convictions or indictments. There are others and a whole bunch more under investigation. What's going on? Is everybody on the take somehow?

No they're not. But as the saying goes, evil triumphs when good men do nothing. And we have done lots of nothing lately. But the depth and severity of this scandal, along with what appears to be a lack of remorse on the part of those involved, just might change that. I applaud President-elect Obama and some other prominent Democrats in Illinois for calling for the resignation of Governor Blagojevich. I also applaud those in the Illinois State legislature now calling for a special election to replace the Senate seat vacated by the President-elect so that there can be no hint of scandal with any appointment that is made.

Similarly, yesterday the Republican Minority Leader John Boehner (R-OH) called for and got the resignation of Congressman Don Young (R-AK), as ranking member of the House Natural Resources Committee. Congressman Young is under federal investigation for improperly using earmarked funds. After Boehner called upon Congressman Young to step-down, he did so voluntarily.

It is not easy to publicly criticize members of one's own party for wrongdoing that is yet to be proven in court. As cutthroat a business politics can be, the fear is that political opponents will accuse everyone of some wrongdoing even without credible evidence if the standard for removal from office is an accusation rather than indictment or conviction. This is a legitimate concern with lots of truth to it. But the court of public opinion does not wait for a judge's order. Most people evaluate the evidence and make their own judgment. And if the public is to have trust and faith in any of us, we must stop covering for, or ignoring the wrongdoings of our own, be they Republican or Democrat. I would love to tell you that this is going on consistently, but it's not.

For instance, Congressman Charles Rangel (D-NY) has multiple allegations surrounding him

yet he is still Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee. The Ways and Means Committee writes the nation's tax laws and one of the allegations is that he did not pay taxes on some of his income because he did not understand the law. Congressman Jerry Lewis (R-CA) has been under federal investigation for several years regarding earmarks he requested, but yet he is still Ranking Member of the House Appropriations Committee, and is still one of the leading earmarkers in Congress.

Speaking of earmarking, Congressman Jesse Jackson Jr. (D-IL) is apparently "candidate # 5" in the Blagojevich scandal and has hired a criminal defense attorney. Several years ago I exposed an earmark requested by Congressman Jackson for \$231,000 which was directed to a non-profit organization to develop a 3rd airport in the Chicago area.

The problem is that no such airport exists even on a drawing board and that the organization was formed by Congressman Jackson and one of his Congressional staffers runs it. I offered an amendment to remove this clearly abusive earmark but it failed by a vote of 48-372. I also tried to get national news organizations to investigate it further but none did, and in one case the prominence of the Jackson name was cited as the reason why.

Senator Tom Coburn (R-OK) has called earmarks the gateway drug to overspending. They are. But they may also be the gateway drug to corruption. Virtually every Member of Congress in jail, under indictment, or investigation is either there because of an abusive earmark or they have abused earmarks on their way to something more sinister.

Sadly, corruption in politics and government is as old as government itself, and there will always be some bad people in positions of power or good people corrupted by that power. But that doesn't mean we should just accept it. Each of us must do more to speak up about the improprieties around us. And we need to remove the temptations like earmarks that create easy targets of abuse.

Auto Industry Bailout: I mentioned last week that I would (and did) abstain on the auto company rescue plan vote. I also mentioned that the House Ethics Committee said that the income I receive on property leases from General Motors was not a conflict. Virtually all of you who e-mailed agreed with me that it is a conflict. The ethics rules say that it is not a conflict if others benefit from the vote in addition to me. So, in other words, since other people have property on which GM pays rent or otherwise would benefit from a non-bankrupt GM, then it is not a conflict. The only way it would be a conflict therefore, was if the bailout money were

basically going to a company I owned since then only I would benefit. The standard should not be whether others would benefit too. It should instead be how significant is the benefit to the member. In other words, I don't think that owning 100 shares of Ford stock would constitute a conflict because it's just not that much money. But if 80% of your income came from Chrysler, I think that would be a conflict even if a million other people were in the same position. Loose Ethics Committee guidelines lead to loose ethics amongst Congressmen.

In my opinion this Blagojevich scandal will be on a par with Watergate and the House Post Office. The effects will reach many powerful people and will the issue will not go away any time soon. I hope that it causes the public to demand more stringent ethics of elected officials and for us to demand more of our colleagues. If that happens, Governor Blagojevich may have perversely helped us all.

Until next time, I remain respectfully,

Congressman John Campbell